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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KCOR](#) [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ML](#)
SUBJECT: FOR WHOM THE WHISTLE BLOWS: AN OFFICE DU NIGER
MURDER MYSTERY

REF: 06 BAMAKO 00918

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1.(SBU) Summary: On August 12, 2007, farmers in Niono discovered the body of Youssouf Dembele, mutilated by multiple hacks of a machete. Dembele was the Secretary General of the Niono chapter of the African Solidarity for Democracy and Independence (SADI) party - a small opposition party known for defending the rights of rural farmers. During recent legislative elections, Dembele masterminded SADI's upset victory of two of Niono's three seats in the Malian National Assembly. He was also, according to his colleagues, the primary whistle-blower behind a still unfolding USD 15.5 million corruption scandal involving the Office du Niger, the government agency charged with overseeing agricultural production in Mali's major rice-growing region. SADI's national leadership has described Dembele's murder as a "political assassination" orchestrated by government officials and political opponents in Niono. Although the investigation into Dembele's death continues, many have interpreted the killing, and the slow pace of the subsequent investigation, as further warning that those challenging the status quo of corruption and impunity within the Office du Niger do so at their own risk. End Summary.

A Day Before Dying

2.(U) On August 11 the Malian Constitutional Court ratified the results of the July 2007 legislative elections. The Court's decision confirmed that 4 of the 147 seats in the National Assembly now belonged to SADI - a small but extremely vocal opposition party whose only member of government, then Minister of Culture Cheikh Oumar Sissoko, had actively campaigned against President Amadou Toumani Toure during both the April presidential and July legislative elections. SADI's presidential candidate, Oumar Mariko, ran on a platform that advocated the nationalization of local industries and finished fourth with less than three percent of the total vote.

3.(U) SADI's second-round legislative victory in Niono was perhaps the most remarkable, albeit overlooked, event of an electoral season that offered few if any surprises. During the July 22 second round of voting, SADI's Niono candidates out-pollled those run by the two giants of Malian politics - the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA) and the Union for Democracy and the Republic (URD) - both flush with funds from supporters of President Toure in Bamako. Trading on local outrage over the rampant corruption for which the Office du Niger is known, Youssouf Dembele created a grassroots groundswell strong enough to overpower the ADEMA and URD

political machines, and beat back local officials' attempts to tip the electoral scales.

4.(U) On August 6 Dembele appeared on the airwaves of a local radio station, Radio Kayira, which is owned by SADI and known for its reporting on corruption within the Office du Niger. In 2004, after the Office du Niger evicted roughly 4000 farmers in Niono ostensibly for failing to pay their irrigation bills, Radio Kayira advocated acts of civil disobedience - a move credited with forcing the Malian government to identify alternative land plots for at least some of those evicted. On August 6 Dembele told Radio Kayira and its listeners that he would provide SADI's newly elected National Assembly Deputies with the remaining documents in his possession regarding Office du Niger corruption as soon as Mali's Constitutional Court ratified SADI's victory. On August 11 the Court rendered SADI's victory in Niono official. Farmers discovered Dembele's mutilated body in a field 5 km from Niono early the next morning.

The Whistle Blows For Thee

5.(U) The Office du Niger oversees the irrigation of approximately 1 million hectares of government owned land in central Mali. Farmers working Office du Niger land pay irrigation fees either with cash or the in-kind equivalent which is often kilograms of rice. Until the 1990s the Office du Niger provided local farmers with fertilizers and seeds and regulated how harvested products were sold. Now village committees sign contracts with private vendors for fertilizer, milling services and the sale of harvested products. While the economic liberalization and land tenure improvements of the 1990s resulted in increased rice production and better management practices, all is still not well within the Office du Niger.

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6.(U) In 2006 the Malian Verificateur General's (VG) Office, which is the only independent agency responsible for investigating cases of corruption in Mali, discovered funds totaling USD 1 million missing from the Office du Niger's books. More troubling, the VG discovered the missing million after looking at only one line item (irrigation payments by local farmers) in just one of the Office du Niger's five rice growing zones: the 72,000 hectare region of Niono (ref A).

7.(U) Obviously aware of the VG's pending report, the Malian government sacked the Director of the Office du Niger, Youssouf Keita, just days before details of the VG's investigation were released in 2006. Authorities in Niono also briefly detained three mid-level Office du Niger officials. These individuals were later released and no charges were filed. In July 2007 the scandal in the Office du Niger ballooned to USD 15.5 million after the VG released a generic overview of its investigation into all the Office du Niger's five regions. The Office du Niger scandal was the largest case of corruption investigated by the VG in 2006-2007 not involving customs duties tied to fuel imports. The VG's complete report, however, has not been made public.

8.(SBU) Associates of Youssouf Dembele maintain that Dembele, who had once worked at the Office du Niger, played a crucial role in passing information to the VG that brought the corruption scandal in Niono to light. Daniel Tessouguet, the head of the VG's investigation team in Niono, denied working with Dembele. "All of the farmers in Niono," Tessouguet told the Embassy, "know that funds in the Office du Niger are not being used properly." But, Tessouguet continued, the VG does not need the assistance of private citizens to conduct a financial audit. Tessouguet refused to comment on whether the VG team conducted interviews or used statements by locals in Niono to guide their investigations.

9.(SBU) Despite Tessouguet's denials, SADI leaders in Bamako maintain that Dembele met personally with Tessouguet and members of his team regarding the finances of the Office du Niger. SADI's Secretary General Oumar Mariko, who was elected to the National Assembly in July and is now the Chairman of the Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, told the Embassy that the Verificateur General's office actually called him to thank SADI for its collaboration. "Several SADI members," said Mariko, "testified against the Office du Niger and delivered documents and now they are all threatened."

A Motive for Murder

10.(U) African political parties are often criticized for revolving around personalities rather than policy positions. During the 2007 legislative elections, however, Youssouf Dembele and SADI crafted a platform that pledged to protect small-time farmers exploited by the Office du Niger, local government officials and prominent economic operators. In so doing Dembele created a grassroots groundswell and a perfect storm of resentment.

11.(U) Dembele attacked Niono's vested political and economic interests. He accused the Office du Niger of over-charging for irrigation fees and keeping phantom accounts; local government officials of privileging the interests of the Office du Niger over the rights of local farmers; and economic operators of selling fertilizer mixed with gravel to farmers at marked-up cost. Most of the individuals within these three groups - Office du Niger management, local government and the economic sector - belong to one of Mali's three largest political parties: the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), its off-shoot the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD) and the Mouvement Citoyen which is a pseudo-political party dedicated to supporting the career of President Toure. Indeed, the businessman accused of selling bad fertilizer also happened to be ADEMA's legislative candidate in Niono. For the 2007 election cycle ADEMA and the URD joined with the Mouvement Citoyen to support President Toure and his interests.

12.(SBU) During the second round of legislative voting on July 22, SADI's candidates went head to head with a split ADEMA-URD ticket. Oumar Mariko described the legislative elections in Niono as "completely staged." Youssouf Dembele and other local SADI leaders denounced what they regarded as government sponsored fraud. "I can still hear his voice now," said Mariko, recalling how Dembele decried cases of government intimidation, pre-votes, double and triple votes, and other misdeeds that occurred during the ballot counting

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process within polling stations.

13.(U) SADI's grassroots organizing and anti-establishment platform paid off. Despite attempts by government officials and others to tilt the scales, SADI out-pollled the rival ADEMA-URD ticket with just under 53 percent of the vote. As SADI waited for the Constitutional Court to ratify nationwide election results, Dembele made his August 6 appearance on Radio Kayira and hinted that he was prepared to pass more material to the Verificateur General.

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Political Assassination, Family Dispute or Both

14.(U) SADI leaders are convinced Dembele's murder was a political assassination orchestrated by political opponents and abetted by local officials. Mariko told the Embassy that SADI members in Niono no longer believe they are protected by local police and that SADI has evacuated at least two individuals, including the brother of Youssouf Dembele, to

Bamako for safety. Following Dembele's murder, several SADI supporters and two journalists for Radio Kayira allegedly received threats of various kinds.

15.(U) Security officials in Niono arrested Youssouf Dembele's son, Ousmane Dembele, on August 15 on suspicion of murder. Dembele remains in prison. In October authorities also arrested Alpha Djeneko, who helped organize the ADEMA candidate's legislative campaign. According to an upper level official at the Ministry of Justice in Bamako, authorities have not uncovered any clues suggesting Dembele's death was politically motivated. The Ministry said investigators have not, however, ruled out revenge as a motive.

Radio Kayira Closed

16.(U) On Nov. 4 the Mayor of Niono shut down Radio Kayira for advertising unauthorized meetings supposedly intended to encourage residents to confront local authorities over the stalled murder investigation, and broadcasting the names of potential murder suspects. In a letter addressed to the radio station, Mayor Aboubacar Fomba said: "Given the need to preserve public peace in the town of Niono, I have decided to close Radio Kayira until further notice." SADI president and now former Minister of Culture Sissoko traveled to Niono following Radio Kayira's closure to meet with local officials.

Comment: Corruption in the Office du Niger

17.(SBU) Until the reforms of the 1990s, Malians used to refer to the Office du Niger as a government within the government. While the Office du Niger is no longer omnipotent, it still casts a long and often dark shadow over those living within Mali's main rice growing regions. The Verificateur General's 2007 report quantified for the first time the scale and depth of corruption within the Office du Niger. It is unfortunate that the VG, which is supposedly independent from the Malian government, has yet to release the full report on the Office du Niger. Equally unfortunate is the Malian judicial system's apparent failure to include the Office du Niger file, which is one of the largest corruption scandals yet uncovered by the VG, among the handful of cases scheduled to be investigated by the government's public prosecutor. The message this sends to those living within the Office du Niger zone is that small time farmers and peasants remain beholden - whether accurate or not - to the interests and apparent impunity of the Office du Niger. The slow pace of the Dembele murder investigation and closing of Radio Kayira only reinforce this message.
McCulley